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DAVID K. FERGUSON

WHY AN UNDERGRADUATE LEADERSHIP PROGRAM?

The Big Question

A few months ago, the “Catalyst One Day” leadership conference came to Chicago. I had come to trust Catalyst from years of attending their two-day events in Atlanta in the fall. And now they would be in my back yard in a format I could afford. The best news was that the organization’s most gifted communicator would be a focal part of the day. So I began plotting to go and take some of my college students with me. I also pitched the idea to the other faculty members of the Andrews University Leadership Program and we decided it would make a great outing, particularly since the focus of the day was on gaining and sustaining leadership momentum. While I was a little nervous about whether my colleagues would enjoy the contemporary music or find the lectures academic enough, once we were sitting in the hosting Illinois mega-church, and the students I’d brought along were furiously scribbling notes, I relaxed a little. Soon, I was immersed in my own notes.

A side benefit of organizing this excursion came in the form of two tickets to a small luncheon halfway through the day where just 50 guests could interact with the two main speakers. I invited Matt, a college sophomore in our leadership program, to join me. While we ate the sandwiches and chips provided, he drank in the opportunity to sit just a few feet away from these leadership gurus as they answered questions from a small stage in the front of the room. The discussion focused mainly on the church environment, so I decided it might be nice to shift toward something a little more applicable to my young friend. I began raising my hand between questions and wondered if I had waited too long as I sensed the session winding down. Finally, they pointed at me and announced that mine would be the last question.

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Caught a little off guard, I gave the background of having recently accepted a position starting a leadership program for undergraduate students at Andrews University and then asked my question: “In that context, could you tell us a leadership lesson you wish you had learned earlier in life?” I was pleased that the individual I most wanted to hear from seemed anxious to respond first. But what he said absolutely stunned me. “When I hear about things like this I think it’s a waste of time. I really don’t believe you can teach leadership to undergraduate students. I don’t think they get it.” And with that, the session was over.

I felt the heat of extra blood rushing to my head. My jaw may have visibly dropped. I turned to notice the confused look on Matt’s face. Questions, thoughts and responses shot through my brain. Was this speaker suggesting that the same students we teach to be doctors, lawyers and every other manner of professional somehow couldn’t grasp the simple, meaningful leadership truths he would discuss through the course of the day? What was it about leadership that he assumed to be more difficult than chemistry, psychology or writing a college-level research paper? I accept that experience creates the context for fully understanding most leadership concepts. But does that mean there is no benefit to learning these truths at an earlier age? The suggestion seemed akin to insisting surgeons wait until a dying patient’s chest is spread open to learn appropriate procedures, or that a soldier can only understand concepts on successful evasive maneuvering or troop positioning after coming under live enemy fire. Did he really believe that those of us who are older—and more prone to being set in our ways and stuck in our ruts—are more capable of handling the change required to act upon leadership lessons? This seemed nonsensical and counter-intuitive to me. Besides, if this accurately portrayed the feelings of his organization, why did they sell tickets to this very training event at a student rate for those in college?

The afternoon sessions resumed and my students continued their note taking with great focus. Matt quickly shrugged off the insult and hungrily dove back into learning. I, however, was distracted and couldn’t let go of this brief conversation. I admire this gentleman greatly for the many leadership lessons he has taught over the years. Surely he must have misunderstood my question. Could he and I be in that much disagreement? His comment further bothered me because it echoed so many of the recent discussions and arguments I’ve heard, and pointed out the need to state a clear case addressing the most

common objections and misunderstandings to teaching leadership to young people.

Setting the Stage

Over the past eight years I have been involved in developing curriculum for and teaching leadership to high school and college students. My interest in doing so was fueled by a simple realization: During my mid-thirties I, along with a handful of colleagues, stumbled into some great leadership development opportunities, and we found the growth painful. This was not because the concepts were difficult or hard to accept, but because they required the reversal of habit and learned behavior in order to put each valuable principle into play. With regularity one of us would be heard asking, “How did we get to this point in our lives without someone teaching us this stuff sooner? Why couldn’t this be taught in formal educational settings at a younger age, before the need for such challenging deconstruction?” Since a number of us worked in high schools, we hatched a plan to pilot a program attempting to teach fundamental leadership principles on a secondary level. In our opinion it was a smashing success. Not only were the students able to cognitively master the materials, but also they evidenced their understanding by actively demonstrating the principles in their daily living. This past year I started a leadership program at Andrews University on the undergraduate level. This has led to numerous discussions about what can and cannot be taught regarding leadership.

Part of the disagreements about whether or not leadership can be taught may come down to something as basic as the way we define leadership. In our undergraduate program we define leadership as simply “intentional influence.” This notion, expressed by many over the years and made popular in the writings of John C. Maxwell, is not unique to us. But it does demonstrate our departure from the idea that leaders are born rather than taught. The great man theory, for instance, suggests leaders are set aside by history for certain times and needs. Similarly, trait theories (derivatives of the great man theory) maintain that all leaders possess a specific set of traits from birth. While particular circumstances and traits do lend themselves to the development of certain kinds of leaders, and genetics does matter, we find it useful to point out that everyone possesses these traits to some degree and can improve on them in a way that increases their influence.

There may also be a difference in the relative value of certain traits over others depending on the context of their use. For instance, fluency

of speech may be a prized leadership quality for the purpose of moving and motivating the masses or at many levels of organizational influence. But when it comes to influencing individual interpersonal relationships, listening skills may be even more important. In truth, all functioning humans possess both skills to some degree or another. And whether our genetics predispose us to high or low functionality in one trait over the other, we believe growth is possible in both. In this regard we side more closely with behavioral theorists who suggest leadership behaviors can be learned and developed. Therefore, our program seeks to provide leadership development opportunities to college undergrads on an “every man” basis. This is not tied to a leadership position, high grade point average, or personality type. In fact, we suggest that every thinking person who comes in contact with others engages in critical leadership behaviors on a daily basis. The important question is not whether a person is a leader, but whether he is maximizing his leadership opportunities.

Common Objections to Leadership Training

I vividly remember a frustrating conversation with an institutional board member. “Why should we be putting such emphasis on leadership when it is only relevant to a few students?” this person asked. “My daughter isn’t a leader. What does this have to do with her?” This kind of thinking persists as a result of the trait theory of leadership mentioned earlier—many people have the misconception that in order to be a leader, one must have certain stereotypical characteristics. The problems with this thinking are manifold.

First, it is nearly impossible to accurately predict which high school or college students are going to develop into our best, most visible leaders—even under traditional definitions. Aren’t we routinely surprised at class reunions that some people we assumed would make a big splash have done little while others we wrote off became highly respected leaders? I don’t think that a father can rightly say what his daughter “is” yet. She is still developing. Could it be that when we make these claims and behave on these assumptions we tempt our young people to live down to our expectations? Even if the great man or trait theories were the most reliable theories of leadership, we would still have to admit that the best leaders of the future might be living among us incognito at these young ages—in which case, it would be best to educate them all toward growth. But this response doesn’t go far enough. If leadership is truly intentional influence, then we can

propose that every thinking human being begins attempting to lead from birth—to use his influence to create the world as he wishes to experience it. And might it be flawed to assess and label leaders based on the volume or depth of leadership impact? Most tend to do this. If it appears that a person is visibly influencing enough people to break over an unnamed threshold, she is labeled a leader. If she stays under that volume threshold, she is not.

Think of it this way. We can all likely accept that Abraham Lincoln was a leader. Let's pretend we could interview him and ask, "Abe, who had the greatest influence in your life?" And let's say his response was his stepmother, Sarah, who never held an office or wrote a book and who probably never cracked anyone else's list of leaders. And suppose he is so engrossed in talking about his stepmother that he never even mentions anyone else, though he most certainly had others to list. And he finishes by saying explicitly, "All I am, or can be, I owe to my angel mother" (Holland, 1866, p. 23).

Shouldn't Sarah Bush Lincoln receive credit for the leadership her son displayed? Or put this way: What if she hadn't influenced him in some of the ways she did so that he never became the leader he did? Would that not in some way be her fault? And if there is an undergraduate college student out there who will be the mother or father of the next Lincoln, and we could teach that person valuable leadership qualities and practices ensuring the leadership impact of their progeny, wouldn't that be worth it? Wouldn't that be a tremendous feat?

It is also important to note that, under many circumstances, the person who appears to be leading (from superficial observation) often proves to be less influential if you delve a layer under the surface. In truth, most leadership or influence is exerted from somewhere in the middle rather than in the classical model from the top down. One might even suggest that we make every bit the societal impact by growing a person's leadership capabilities from a 2 to a 4 on a scale of 1 to 10 as we do moving someone from an 8 to a 9, even though the first person may never be labeled a "leader" while the second is likely to be. For all these reasons, it seems most profitable to teach leadership—without discrimination—on an undergraduate level.

Ironically, the most common reaction of those who initially object to leadership training is to flip 180 degrees once the concept is presented in this way. They race quickly past agreement to suggesting leadership training should be mandatory for all students, possibly a general education requirement. This, I believe, goes too far. In my experience, the

most valuable qualifier for those who should pursue this kind of training is personal interest and commitment. Making leadership training a requirement causes it to lose something extraordinarily important. It spoils the process for everyone. Besides, it usually takes very little effort to demonstrate and convince a young person of its value. Much is gained by the initiative required of a student to make the time and space to grow in this area.

Some would suggest that it would be better to wait to teach leadership until a person has the context of experience to understand it. They have a point. There are some leadership lessons that make little sense until you have the opportunity to put them into practice. However, I would contend that it is just as valuable to provide the laboratory for experimentation uniquely found on most undergraduate campuses as it is to wait until getting to the “real world” application. The problem for most is that if we wait to teach leadership lessons until ignorance and bad habits have calcified, we make implausible deconstruction a requirement, even if those truths are quickly understood and desired. What could have been easy to include and ingrain in our leadership practices becomes nearly impossible. It reminds me of the piece of pumpkin pie I once had as a guest in someone’s house. To her embarrassment, the hostess had forgotten to add sugar to the ingredients before putting the pie in the oven, and it tasted horrible. Even though she passed sugar around the table and urged us to dump it on our pies, this couldn’t salvage the flavor. Timing matters. Just like the sugar, the best leadership training should be baked in at a time that doesn’t require much disassembly for the desired effect.

What About Matt?

Just the other day my student Matt came into my office to discuss what was on his mind. It so happens that in the days following our trip to Catalyst, he has been preoccupied with what he learned about how to maintain momentum in organizations. Matt is one of the student leaders in an ongoing campus event that has been wildly popular over the past five years. But as he brought this up, he said, “Pastor Dave, I am worried that we’ve lost momentum.” He listed the evidence and described how he is using the principles he learned to address the problem. As he left, I found myself wondering if any of my colleagues or I had so successfully integrated these principles in our current leadership contexts. And I thought again how silly a notion it is that undergrad students aren’t capable of “getting it.”

Truly, leadership learning is a lifelong process. And it is ignorant to suppose that we can graduate students who are complete as leaders. In fact, it is likely that what is more important is the balance of what gets started in their leadership development than what gets finished. However, I believe that any students who embark on leadership development at the undergraduate level have an exponential advantage over the people they otherwise would have been when it comes to impact, influence and making a difference in the world around us.

Reference

Holland, J. G. (1866). *Life of Abraham Lincoln*. Springfield, MA: G. Bill.